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The Changing Context of Tertiary English Teaching in China and Teachers’ Responses to the Challenges

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Award of the Degree

Doctor of Education

from

University of Wollongong

by

LIANLI CLARA GAO

B.A. and M. A., Literature and Linguistics in China

Faculty of Education

March 2007

Thesis Certification

I, Lianli Clara Gao, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Education, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Signed

LIANLI CLARA GAO

28th March 2007

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GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

ALM	The Audiolingual Method
CEC	College English Curriculum/Curricula, in particular, in 1985 and 1999
CECR	College English Curriculum Requirements 2004
CET-4/6	College English Test (Band Four/Six)
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EFL	English as Foreign Language
EGP	English for General Purposes
ELT	English language teaching
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ME	The Ministry of Education in China
SET	Spoken English Test in CET-4/6
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
TESOL	Teaching English to Students of Other Languages
TET	Tertiary English teaching

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine changes in tertiary English teaching in China and the perceptions and reactions of university English teachers, administrators and policy-makers to these changes. In particular, the study focused on the tension between policy and reality in the areas of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in Chinese university English teaching. The key research question, therefore, related to how tertiary English teachers are meeting the challenges of the changing expectations of their profession, taking into account the complex context of tertiary English teaching in China with its characteristic historical, cultural, economic and political issues.

Different from most other research in this field in China, the study adopted a sociocultural perspective, using Bourdieu's (1971b; 1984) notion of 'field' and Bernstein's (1990; 2000) 'three message systems' to diagnose the expectations placed on English instructors as a result of changes in what to teach (curriculum), how to teach (pedagogy), and how to assess (assessment and evaluation). The study, finally, was organized around the principles of *temporality*, *autonomy*, and *specialisation* (Maton, 2004a, 2005) to identify teachers' and administrators' orientation to change, the degree of autonomy conferred by the changes and the specialist knowledge needed to respond to the changes.

A qualitative inquiry approach was adopted to explore thick and authentic data from a variety of sources, including policy documents, university syllabi, course designs, textbooks, assessment instruments, surveys, and interviews with teachers, administrators and policy-makers.

It was found that, although there is a great recognition of the need for reform, attempts have so far been ineffective because:

- policy appears to be inconsistent and unclear in its theoretical basis;
- the universities tend not to play a mediating role in interpreting national policy at the local level, leaving teachers to fall back on what is familiar;
- there is a lack of adequate pre-service training for English language instructors in the areas of ELT curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, and a lack of sufficient in-

service professional development for further understanding and implementing policy in their teaching;

- textbooks and external examinations dominate tertiary English teaching, inhibiting change;
- as a result, university English language instruction is in a state of inertia and English language instructors are feeling confused and uncertain.

The study argues that power over university English language education remains centralised despite the apparent policy mandate to devolve autonomy in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment to the universities and university English language instructors do not have the necessary background and experience in language education to assume autonomy or implement reform.